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AUTHOR Rupley, William H.
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ABSTRACT

Reading comprehension includes both how much a reader remembers and how well the reader understands what has been read. It is dependent upon processing meaning. A model for how this is done includes three steps: identifying important elements of the text, constructing representations of important text information, and matching the representations to existing concepts. Important elements of the text such as dates, experimental procedures, character relationships, frequency of appearance, or logical or grammatical relationships provide cues to focus the reader's attention. Internal representations may be visual, verbal, haptic (touch), or a combination of these. A breadth of long term memory allows the reader to form appropriate representations of what is read. Elaborating or abstracting information, integration of important information, and assigning names to representations are also subprocesses that are important for internal representations allowing increased comprehension. (FJ)

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William H. Rupley
Reading/Language Research Laboratory
Texas A&M University

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
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The Goal of Reading Instruction: Comprehension of Written Language*

Early investigations in reading comprehension focused on how much individuals could remember after reading something. If they could correctly recall, recognize, or restate parts of what was read, then it was assumed that comprehension occurred. This concept of reading comprehension has now been expanded to include not only how much is remembered, but also a person's understanding of what is read. Such a concept implies that reading comprehension is more than remembering words or ideas but understanding what they mean.

We know that word identification, language competency and other such reading factors are important in reading comprehension. However, we also know that many readers are highly skilled in these areas, yet still experience comprehension difficulties.

It appears that comprehension is dependent upon processing meaning rather than sounds or words, however, mature readers do not always focus on meaning when reading. Rote memorization or oral reading of written materials does not imply understanding. Reading or reciting aloud a poem, pledge, or story may not require attention to the ideas presented. Children frequently exhibit such behaviors in verbal learnings: "Jose can you see," for "Oh say can you see"; "Round John Virgin," for "Round yon Virgin."

Readers meaningful processing of text is often discussed in relation to their background of experiences. For example, many descriptions

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*Based on Chapter 11 of READING DIAGNOSIS AND REMEDIATION: A PRIMER FOR CLASSROOM AND CLINIC, by William H. Rupley and Timothy R. Blair, Rand McNally College Publishing Co., Chicago, Illinois, 1979.

of reading comprehension refer to it as reconstructing the author's message in light of how well it matches the reader's experiential background. This has been interpreted to mean that many comprehension problems result from a poor match between the text and the reader's experiences. Although the match between author's and reader's experiences is important to comprehension, this alone cannot explain comprehension difficulties. If readers only read that with which they are familiar; then, no new information could be acquired from reading.

Learning from reading supports the idea that comprehension is the processing of ideas as opposed to just recognizing the words. The reader whose language and reading abilities are appropriate to what is read goes beyond the words themselves and is concerned with the ideas. In many instances this may require the reorganization of experiences into new ones during reading.

How new ideas are acquired and how a reader relies on past experiences to comprehend is postulated in a model of the reading comprehension process developed by Miller (1975). The model has three basic steps: (1) identifying important elements of the text, (2) constructing representations of important text information, and (3) matching the representations to existing concepts.

Important elements of the text provide cues about on what the reader's attention should be focused. Elements can be specific text information such as dates or names in a history text, experimental procedures or results in a science text, or character relationships in a story. Other elements could be those that appear frequently or

those connected by logical or grammatical relationships.

It seems that when teachers set specific purposes for reading they are helping or forcing students to focus on important (or teacher perceived important) text elements. For example, asking students to read a story about a wild pony because they should enjoy it does not provide any cues for focusing on important information. However, asking them to read and be able to discuss specifically why taming the wild pony was difficult provides the children with cues to the important text elements on which they must focus. In the latter example, the children should be more attentive to what makes a pony wild and why these characteristics make it hard to tame. The amount of specificity can be varied in terms of pupils' capabilities and the match between what they are reading and their experimental conceptual background.

After the important elements are identified they are then represented internally. The process of internal representations may be visual, verbal, haptic (touch) or a combination of these. Four subprocesses make up the internal representation process.

First, information is retrieved from long term memory to form representations for the ideas read. This long term memory information could have been stored through visual processing (pictures, objects, films, etc.); verbal processing (hearing, reading, or both); haptic processing (touching), or a combination of these (seeing an object or event, hearing a description of it, and feeling it). A breadth of long term memory information allows the reader to form appropriate

representations of what is read.

Comprehension of the wild pony story would be facilitated for the child who knows that a wild pony is larger than a dog and will buck, kick, bite, and resist being ridden. Such information becomes of greater importance if it is not mentioned in the story. The more information stored in long term memory about ponies allows the reader to draw upon it to form a representation.

A wide background of experiences aids comprehension because it helps children form representations of story ideas. I was explaining recently to a seven year old that the neighbors had their camper opened up in their driveway to air it out. Evidently, she understood all of the words but not the idea when she asked, "Will it go flat like my swimming pool?" Her representation of what it meant to "air out" something was limited to letting the air out of her plastic pool.

Elaborating on the text information or abstracting it to remove unnecessary details is the second subprocess. The wild pony story may only describe the pony as black and white spotted. A child reading the story might elaborate on this information and perceive the pony as having large black spots, a long white tail, a white face, and so forth. Thus, the representation of the pony may take on those features of pony information stored in long term memory. A possible explanation for elaboration of text information is that it facilitates retention (and/or fulfills both the constraints of message and meaning) (Miller, 1976).

In other instances a reader may remove (abstract) all unnecessary details to form a representation. This behavior would suggest that too

many details may interfere with constructing and understanding internal representations. For example, children reading directions for playing a new game often do not understand how the game is to be played. If you have ever watched them puzzle out the problem you probably noted that several things happened. One child usually reads the instructions as another relates them to the game board. After rereading only what they consider the important directions several times, they begin to play the game one step at a time. Soon each step is integrated with the other and the problem of how to play is solved. The children were attempting to form representations of only the essential features of the game's directions. If parts of the directions did not help them to solve the problem then these were ignored.

A third subprocess of forming representations of ideas is integration of important information. Integration involves making inferences about a representation and its relationship to new text information or identifying and adjusting inconsistencies between representations. If readers comprehend in terms of how they form representations of ideas, as the research suggests, then integration of ideas is one of the major comprehension factors.

Many children who have comprehension problems exhibit difficulties with integrating the ideas presented in the story. They can often discuss the story information but do not understand the relationship between this information. It may be that such children are unaware that their representations are inconsistent with each other or with the story information. The former problem results in bits and pieces of unconnected information and the latter results in total confusion.

Logic suggests that both problems could occur together, especially when representations are inconsistent with story information. For example, if your information of Texas stored in long term memory was acquired only through western movies, you might form inconsistent representations when reading about southeast Texas. Reading about the green rolling hills, lakes, pastures dotted with wild flowers, tall pines, and cool winters of southeast Texas does not fit well with the information stored about southwest settings of many cowboy movies. Your representation would probably include desert land, cacti, arid conditions, rattlesnakes, and so forth. An inconsistency develops between your representation of Texas and the author's information, not allowing you to comprehend the story.

The fourth subprocess that helps a reader comprehend is assigning names to representations. Assigning names becomes important for comprehension when story settings, topics, or characters are presented in a fashion that makes naming difficult. How this becomes important can be illustrated with the earlier example of the children learning to play a game. Assume that the directions referred to the players as "first player", "second player", "third player", and "fourth player." One child reading these directions may not have any problems with understanding the naming. When four children get together to learn how to play the game they may have problems understanding who plays when and how. Directions may be better understood if the reader assigns each child's name to the numbered players in the text. Resulting in better representation of the directions and improved comprehension.

The third major stage of the comprehension model represents the completion of the comprehension process. Here the reader's representations are matched with something he/she already knows. Representations can be thought about in a variety of ways and the reader searches for the one that makes sense. This process is similar to the point that reading comprehension is more than just reconstructing the author's message. Information can be recombined in many ways and ideas are comprehended in terms of representations that make sense, which can result in new learning.